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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that religion should be taught as a separate class in the public schools. Reasons for teaching religion include: (1) religious believes affect human behavior in strong observable ways; (2) churches abound in number throughout the United States; (3) different religions tend to teach a somewhat common core of values while values and morality are neglected greatly in the public school curriculum; (4) a study of religion is classical in nature and possesses values for its own sake; (5) religious views express a culture; (6) expressions from holy books abound in society; and (7) holy books contain content on selected academic disciplines such as geography, history, literature, economics, sociology, and anthropology. An interdisciplinary curriculum may be emphasized in teaching units of study on major religions on the planet earth. In discussing the qualifications for teachers, the article suggests that teachers for religion courses should be of the highest caliber with a major in philosophy and religion. Teachers of religion classes must be objective in presenting content as well as in answering questions. Continuous inservice education is needed for each teacher in being truthful and fair about each religion being taught. Teachers need to guide students to identify and solve problems in the area of religions. Teachers of secondary level religion classes should attempt to select key ideas pertaining to each unit taught. Ethnocentrism results when students do not understand religious beliefs of others. Public school students need ample opportunities to experience relevant objectives, learning opportunities, and appraisal procedures on religion. (DK)

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Teaching Religion in the Public Schools

by

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TEACHING RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Teaching religion in the public schools is long past due. Religion as a course should be a separate class. Good teachers have always brought in a study of religion as it relates to a curriculum area such as social studies. Thus when students are studying units on Massachusetts Bay Colony, for example, learners have acquired vital subject matter pertaining to religious beliefs of the Puritans. Most students tend to be interested religion as it affects human behavior. One student asked in class why the Old Order Amish have signs up on their farms saying "no Sunday business." The learner was fascinated, along with other pupils, that one of the ten commandments (Exodus 20) is involved in Amish religious philosophy — "Observe the Sabbath and keep it holy. You have six days in which to do your work, but the seventh day is a day of rest dedicated to me...." There are numerous reasons as to why public school students should study religion as a separate curriculum area, as well as be related to other subject matter areas.

Reasons for Teaching Religion

Religious beliefs do affect human behavior in strong observable ways. In selected areas of South Dakota, Montana, and North Dakota, Hutterite communes are in evidence. Just outside of Freeman, South Dakota, for example, Hutterites own all property in common as do all members of this faith. No one owns property individually. Why is communal ownership of property in evidence? The Hutterites, since the sixteenth century, have taken literally Acts 2 in which members of the early church had and owned all things in common.

Second, churches abound in number throughout the United States. They are truly numerous indeed. Synagogues for Jews, and Mosques for Moslems, as well as structures and buildings for divers other religious groups, are increasing in number in the United States.

Religious freedom has always been a cherished ideal for people who came to the shores of the US. To be ignorant of different religions is to be an illiterate person. Negative human relations among divers religious groups can be an end result.

Third, different religions tend to teach a somewhat common core of values such as "do not commit murder" and "do not steal." Values and morality is greatly neglected in the public school curriculum. A study of religion would provide students with the opportunity to analyze, evaluate, and appraise diverse values. The curriculum area of history also provides chances for learners to study values that persons emphasized in deeds and acts. Science as a curriculum area is certainly not neutral in the studying of values. Whatever technology, inventions, and beliefs in science accrue, values are inherent, e. g. use of pesticides and herbicides versus a clean environment, a complex dilemma to resolve indeed. Thus values need to be stressed in teaching about religion as well as in other curriculum areas.

Fourth, a study of religion is classical in nature and possesses values for its own sake. Perennialism has always emphasized that the classics have intrinsic values. The classics have endured in space and time. Writings of holy books have stood the test of time in endurance. They have remained salient, in most cases, for at least a thousand years. These writings have also endured in space. Thus in different geographical regions, holy writings have survived in good as well as bad times.

Fifth, religious views express a culture. Cultures differ in degrees from area to area as well as region to region. Cultures also interact which unify beliefs and ideas. Ideas are borrowed from other cultures, presently as well as in the past. Thus the Christian religion (the New Testament and the Old Testament) was built upon the ideas of Judaism (the Pentateuch or first five books of the Old Testament). St. Thomas Aquinas (1225- 1274) harmonized the philosophy of Aristotle (384- 322 BC) of ancient Athens with Christianity to provide for the official theology of the Catholic church. The Koran, holy book of the Moslems, shows both the influences of Judaism and Christianity. To devout Moslems, the

following, among others, are prophets as indicated in the Koran: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Soloman, Jesus, and Mohammed. Mohammed is the final prophet for devout followers of Islam. Averroes (1126- 1198), Moslem philosopher and theologian, harmonized Aristotelian philosophy and Islamic religious thought. Moses Maimonides (1135- 1204) did the same for Judaism in integrating Aristotelian philosophy with Judaism. The forces of good and evil (religious thinking of Zoroaster who lived in the sixth century BC in ancient Persia) battling for dominance in real live situations is certainly in evidence in the book of Job in the Old Testament. In the book of Job, God and Satan sought to win over Job when the latter lost all of his possessions, his children, and his health These are just a few examples of the borrowing of ideas from one religious group to the next.

Sixth, expressions from holy books abound in society. Thus in the US, the following statements, for example, are made:

1. He/she is a good Samaritan (from the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10: 25- 37).

2. It has rained so hard, we will have to take an ark to get home (from the story of Noah and the ark in Genesis 7).

3. He saw the handwriting on the wall (from the incident of King Belshazzar in ancient Babylon giving a banquet where much drinking and immorality occurred. A hand appeared and wrote on the wall "you have been weighed and found wanting." Daniel 5).

Seventh, holy books contain content on selected academic disciplines such as geography, history, literature, economics, sociology, and anthropology. An interdisciplinary curriculum may truly be emphasized in teaching units of study on major religions on the planet earth. In the Holy Land, for example, there are major, unique geographical features which are mentioned in the Bible and affected what was written therein. The familiar words "a city set on a hill cannot be hid" is written in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5- 7). The walled city of Jerusalem (capitol city of ancient Israel) is set on a hill, approximately 2500 above sea level, whereas the Dead Sea, located 20 miles east, is 1300 feet below sea level. The Dead sea region is the

lowest elevation for any place on the planet earth. Along the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, the Dead Sea scrolls were discovered by a bedouin shepherd and analyzed by archeologists, a branch of anthropology. Here, excavations were made and the site of the ancient Essenes, a communal group, was found.

The Sea of Galilee, 660 feet below sea level, is located 67 miles north of the north end of the Dead Sea. The Sea of Galilee receives fresh water from the melted snows of Mount Hermon, 9000 feet above sea level and 120 miles north of the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea can have temperature readings above 110 degrees F. whereas Mount Hermon can have snow caps in July. The Holy Land, birth place of three religions, indeed has many interesting geographical features for students to study. The Mediterranean climate in which rain falls from November to April only, is in the Middle East area of the world.

Qualifications of Teachers

Courses taught in religion must have teachers of the highest caliber. As a long range goal, these teachers must have a major (BSE) in philosophy and religion. Teaching about religions is very complex. Chemistry and physics are considered to be difficult classes for students in the secondary schools. Courses in religion could be equally difficult. There are many, many subject matter objectives for preservice teachers to attain to understand and teach courses on religions. As an example, a number of years ago, I spoke at a teacher education conference on "The Old Order Amish." The room was small and held about forty persons. I kept one chair open to place my slide projector since no screen and table for the projector was forth coming and it was past time to start the session. I used my coat and two empty boxes to place my slide projector thereon. I had everything in order for the presentation including using the wall with colored designs for the screen. A person in the session asked a question of myself before presenting the talk on "The Old Order Amish. During that brief moment, another participant joined the session and took everything down from the chair where I had so carefully balanced my coat and boxes for having the slide projector up

high enough to show the slides. I almost panicked, but quickly realized there is more than one way to present subject matter. Extemporaneously, I compared the Old Order Amish with the General Conference Mennonites, herein after called Mennonites. I grew up as a Mennonite and most of my relatives belong to this sect presently. Interest and enthusiasm by participants was high indeed! Many did not know that there are MD's, university professors and administrators, public school teachers and administrators, owners and managers of businesses, as well as attorneys among the Mennonites. Mennonites are also farmers, custodians, cafeteria workers, and truck drivers, among other forms and types of work. What I am saying is that knowledge of religion and diverse religious groups is complex and takes teachers of excellence who are well educated. When teaching high school students, it is difficult to say which questions will be raised by motivated learners. Certainly, much damage can be done by teachers of religion if stereotyped ideas are presented about any religious group.

It is vital for teachers of classes in religion be objective in presenting content as well as in answering questions. A biased, prejudiced teacher should not teach course content on religion. Is that possible from a teacher of a particular religious faith? I definitely believe it is possible if teachers are trained and educated thoroughly about major religions on the planet earth. Continuous inservice education is needed for each teacher in being truthful and fair about each religion being taught. Preservice programs must stress objectivity in student teaching programs. Again, a long range goal will be in the offing when teachers of religion are available and quality of instruction is truly in evidence in the public schools.

Teachers need to guide students to identify and solve problems in the area of religions. Curiosity of students needs to be secured so that vital questions are raised by learners. Problem solving approaches might then be emphasized in teaching- learning situations. Each student should be able to identify a problem, develop a related hypothesis, gather data, test the hypothesis, and revise the hypothesis if necessary. Then too, teachers need to engage students in critical thinking so that

fact can be separated form opinion as well as fantasy form reality. As s further skill in higher levels of cognition, students need to think creatively. Interpretation of content acquired requires creative thinking. Further evidence of creative thought stresses developing unique, novel ideas, originality of response, and divergent thinking. In a study of religion, students will emphasize higher cognitive levels when participating in ongoing activities and experiences. Much knowledge is needed for students to engage in problem solving, critical thinking, as well as creative thinking.

In student teaching experiences, the preservice teacher must make content meaningful to students. Vague, hazy subject matter has little value for future teachers of religion in the public schools. Thus learners need to understand that which was taught so that use can be made of these facts, concepts, and generalizations. Interest of students is needed in each class taught. The university instructor of courses in religion must guide students to perceive purpose in each lesson taught. Purposes can be stressed inductively or deductively. It is quite obvious that the university instructor serves as as role model for the future teacher of religion in the public schools.

A well prepared preservice teacher should take demanding courses, as a minimum, in the following areas;

1. History of Religions
2. Philosophy of religion.
3. Psychology and Religion.
4. Sociology of Religion.
5. Research Methods in Religion.

The Structure of Knowledge

Teaches of courses in religion on the secondary level should attempt to select key ideas pertaining to each unit taught. Thus when students are studying Islam, they should achieve major ideas in the five pillars of Islam. The following represent these structural ideas and emphasize what all devout Moslems should attain a a minimum:

1. believe in and say the creed of Islam — "There is one God

only, and Mohammed is his prophet.

2. give two and one-half per cent of one's income as alms to the poor.

3. make a pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia at least once during one's life time. Mecca is the holiest city on earth for devout Moslems. It was the birth place of Mohammed in 570 AD.

4. pray five times a day as prescribed in the Koran.

5. fast during the month of Ramadan, the lunar month when the annual pilgrimage to Mecca is in session.

Islam has a fascinating history with Caliphs that ruled the Moslem world following the death of Mohammed in 632 AD. I have asked many Moslem university students who the greatest Moslems were after Mohammed. Usually students respond with the first four caliphs which were Abu Bakr, father-in-law of Mohammed, who united Arabs as believers in Islam; Omar who lead Moslem troops to capture the land of Palestine; Uthman whose Caliph rule lead to Damascus, rather than Mecca being the capitol of the Moslem religion, and Ali, a son of Mohammed. With the rule of Ali, there was disagreement as to rulers being direct dependents of Mohammed as compared to the caliph being elected from the general population.

I taught on the West Bank of the Jordan for two years and have made numerous return trips to that area. When viewing the Dome of the Rock, a Moslem mosque built in 691 AD inside the walled city of Jerusalem, I marvel at the quality of architecture in this octagonal structure with Mount Moriah located inside. A hundred feet away is the Mosque El Aksa, built in 706 AD. According to devout followers of Islam, Mohammed made a journey to heaven and returned back to earth in the area that the Mosque el Aksa stands. Both mosques have a niche inside and on a wall that points in the direction of Mecca, the birthplace of Mohammed and Islam's holiest city. Also inside the walled city of Jerusalem is the Western Wall, the only remnant of the ancient Jewish temple.

The Old Testament includes the Pentateuch (the first five books of

the Old Testament) and the Torah (contains Jewish history from the creation to Moses's death). Included in the Torah are the Ten Commandments and fundamental laws of Judaism. The Prophets (Ezekiel, Micah, Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah) and the Writings (Proverbs and Psalms), also contained in the Old Testament, are additional holy books to devout Jews.

Buddha (563- 483 BC) has given rich, ethical ideas in the religious beliefs of Buddhism. Buddha believed that the desire for wealth and pleasure causes sadness and unhappiness. Being a slave of wealth and things, hinders the person in acquiring insight and knowledge. Individuals can escape from bondage by choosing truth and goodness. Overcoming sorrow and selfishness to achieve peace are major goals of devout Buddhists. Buddha left the riches of palace life and devoted his life to helping poor people. He believed that by cultivating love toward others discards all feelings of hatred and resentment. Additional ideas in religion which students need to study in an objective manner are Hinduism and Shintoism.

In Summary

Religious instruction in schools is important. Quality in teaching-learning situations emphasize that the teacher be objective and treat each religion with the utmost respect. Accepting the religious beliefs of each student is a must. Ridiculing or minimizing of religious beliefs has no role to play in the school curriculum. It will take time before universities have a degree program which prepares a student to become a regular teacher teaching courses in religion. These teachers will need to be highly knowledgeable and have mature attitudes in teaching religion in an unbiased approach. Knowledge in depth of diverse religions as well as methodology to use in teaching are key concepts to emphasize in teaching religion in the public schools. The history of the US indicates that peoples of diverse religious beliefs are citizens. Religion has always had a strong influence on the behavior of individuals and yet the public schools in the US have almost been anti-religion in the curriculum. There is a definite dichotomy between what exists in society with its strong emphasis on religious

buildings/structures and the public schools shunning religious instruction in the curriculum.

Ethnocentrism results when students do not understand religious beliefs of others and maintain their own to be superior. It might well be also that individuals are completely ignorant of their own religious beliefs. For example, I have met many people who say they believe in literal interpretation of the Bible and yet upon further inquiry admit they know very little about the Bible. Ignorance certainly is not bliss. The public schools have many responsibilities already, but I maintain that quality teaching about religion is a necessity. A well educated person must have good knowledge of and a healthy attitude toward religious beliefs of others. My life has truly been enriched with a study of diversity of religions, especially in the Middle East area of the world. Students need ample opportunities in the public schools to experience relevant objectives, learning opportunities, and appraisal procedures in the curriculum of religion.